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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 001050

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TAGS: [KISL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [MO](#)
SUBJECT: SENIOR JCO LEADER SOUNDS OFF ON ELECTIONS AND GOM
REPRESSION, CLAIMS INCREASING PUBLIC SUPPORT

REF: A. RABAT 947
[1](#)B. RABAT 396 AND PREVIOUS

Classified by Ambassador Thomas Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: During a June 20 meeting, a senior leader of "Al-Adl wal Ihsane" - the Justice and Charity Organization (JCO), Morocco's large quasi-legal Islamist political organization, told poloQ that the group was adhering to its rejection of participation in the political system but was not actively promoting a boycott of the September parliamentary elections. He repeated complaints of GOM repression of the group, but claimed the government's efforts were futile - the JCO's membership is growing, he asserted. Mutawakil charged that GOM policies were to blame for the growth of extremism in the country and warned that Morocco's current governance model was "unsustainable." He called on the USG to put pressure on the GOM to pursue meaningful political reform. End summary.

Elections: No Boycott but No Participation

[1](#)2. (C) Abdelwahed Mutawakil, a member of the Justice and Charity Organization's Guidance Bureau and chairman of its political committee, told poloff during a June 20 meeting that the group was not actively promoting a boycott of the September parliamentary elections. The JCO would nonetheless adhere to its rejection of participation in Morocco's political system, he emphasized, and asserted that most Moroccans shared the view that the elections were irrelevant in a country where the parliament is powerless and authority is concentrated in the Palace and a small elite that surrounds it. "We don't need to call for a boycott, the people are already boycotting," he stated, referring to low voter participation rates.

[1](#)3. (C) Mutawakil maintained that the results of the parliamentary elections would not yield any difference in the state of the country, which he maintained was characterized by stagnation and oppression, led by a corrupt and complacent oligarchy. Even if the (legal) Islamist Party of Justice and Development (PJD) substantially increased its representation, they would be unable to effect any change, he argued. "We have said to them so many times, why go inside the government when you cannot change anything?" Mutawakil repeated the JCO's position that only comprehensive constitutional reform (reducing or eliminating the power of the monarchy) could solve Morocco's underlying problems. Mutawakil was scathingly critical of Morocco's political parties for their failure to actively promote constitutional reform. In the absence of this reform, political participation was meaningless, he argued.

Repression Continues...

14. (C) Mutawakil claimed that the GOM's campaign of repression against the JCO, launched in the spring of 2006 in response to the group's "open house" recruitment and public outreach drive, was continuing. He cited the police's May 23 suppression of a press conference staged by JCO spokesman Fathallah Arsalane (ref A) as a case in point. "Can you imagine, that a government which uses the rhetoric of democracy and free expression would go to such lengths to prevent a peaceful news conference?" he asked. The incident typified the GOM's approach to the group, he stated, claiming that police regularly acted to prevent the JCO from organizing picnics, beach outings, and any other public activities.

15. (C) Mutawakil further cited the case of Rachid Ghulam, a popular singer and JCO member, who was convicted in March of adultery after being arrested at a brothel. The JCO maintains that Ghulam had been abducted, tortured, and dumped at the brothel by plainclothes police, who further arranged for him to be arrested there, as part of an effort to defame Ghulam and the group as a whole. (Comment: However, an Embassy human rights contact recently told us that their enquiries indicated that Ghulam was a regular client of the brothel, well known by its staff. End comment.)

16. (C) Mutwakil also cited the case of female JCO member Hayat Boueida, who was stabbed in May. The JCO claims the attack was carried out by security forces in retaliation for her refusal to become a police informer. Many JCO members are pressed to become informers, he asserted, "but this is OK, as we have nothing to hide...We have rejected underground

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activities." Mutawakil said that he currently counted 12 JCO members in prison - all had been convicted of murder in the early 1990s in a case involving the death of a university student in Oujda. They had been convicted unfairly, and denied all opportunities for a royal pardon, or parole, merely because they were JCO members, he claimed.

...But JCO Membership Grows (?)

17. (C) The government's continuing repression of the JCO, Mutawakil maintained, is the best evidence that the GOM is aware of the group's substantial and growing support from the Moroccan public. He asserted that, despite the government's efforts to keep the group contained, ("They know it is impossible to erradicate us,") the JCO's membership is actually growing. Mutawakil declined to offer any statistics on the total size of the JCO ("We don't like to talk about this"). European academics have estimated the group to have up to 200,000 adherents in Morocco and more in the Moroccan diaspora in Europe. The group's presence is particularly pronounced in Moroccan communities in the Spanish cities of Malaga, Murcia, and Valencia, a Spanish diplomat recently told poloff.

GOM Practices Breed Extremism

18. (C) Asked about the threat of terrorism in Morocco, in the wake of suicide bombings in Casablanca in March and April, Mutawakil blamed the GOM. "If you suppress moderates (like the JCO), this is what will happen," he maintained. "We call for dialogue and peaceful action and people see how we are oppressed and arrested," he stated, some conclude there is no point in peaceful means when the government reacts in this way. The people are suffering from poverty, neglect, and oppression, and their frustration boils over, he continued. He repeatedly emphasized that the JCO would never abandon its

commitment to peaceful action and its firm rejection of violence.

USG Should Press the GOM

¶9. (C) Mutawakil said the JCO welcomed contact with the Embassy, but hoped the USG would press the GOM to pursue meaningful political reform. He dismissed reforms undertaken to date as superficial, meaningless, and intended only for international consumption. Unless there is strong external pressure for change, the GOM will never undertake meaningful democratic reforms, he emphasized. Morocco's current course is unsustainable, he argued, and would lead to disaster. Asked to elaborate on his scenario for disaster, Mutawakil only shook his head and said "anything is possible."

Comment

¶10. (C) We are unable to either verify or disprove Mutawakil's claims of growing public support and membership in the JCO. The GOM's enmity toward the group is principally based on its anti-monarchical stance. We observe that the government's efforts to contain the JCO are carefully calibrated. It is noteworthy that no JCO members or leaders are currently imprisoned (with the exception of the 12 from the 1990s murder case). We would not exclude that the government could be using the Sufi/Marabouti JCO as a counter to the spread of Salafism in the country and specifically as a rival to the Islamist PJD. However, there is clearly a pattern of state harassment and repression and there are numerous pending criminal and civil cases against JCO members.

¶11. (C) The GOM appears willing to tolerate the group's existence as long as it remains behind closed doors, while ventures into the public tend to be forcefully suppressed. We do not share Mutawakil's dire prognosis for Morocco. Unfortunately, we have to agree with his citation of the concentration of power in the executive, state corruption, and poverty as core challenges facing the country and obstacles to the emergence of democratic institutions. Voter participation rates will be watched closely in September. Turnout was measured at 51 percent in the 2002 polls. We doubt that the JCO's stance against participation will in itself have a measurable effect on this fall's polls. End comment.

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